

Thursday, Dec. 10, 2009

Discussion highlights county veterans issues

Officials pledge solutions for homelessness, transitional housing

by Joshua Garner | Staff Writer

This story was corrected on Dec. 10, 2009. An explanation follows the story.

A coalition of Prince George's County and state officials pledged during a roundtable discussion in Annapolis to increase efforts to address the needs of the 70,000 veterans in Prince George's County.

The meeting Friday was organized by Del. Justin Ross (D-Dist. 22) of Greenbelt and John 14:2 Inc., an Accokeek-based nonprofit advocating for veterans, to discuss problems facing veterans, including homelessness and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Prince George's population of all veterans and homeless veterans is the highest of any county in the state. The Maryland Department of Veteran affairs estimates there are more than 2,500 homeless veterans in the county.

Representatives from the county's departments of housing and family services, the county's Commission for Veterans and similar departments from the state and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs discussed possible veteran "villages," a housing complex for veterans, and transitional housing shelters that would include transportation services. Currently, there are no transitional housing facilities for veterans in the county.

"The whole idea of the roundtable was to bring everyone together to discuss why there aren't transitional housing and supportive services for veterans in Prince George's County," said Ginger Miller, CEO of John 14:2, who moderated the discussion. "The idea is to talk about homeless veterans and what we could do to help them in the county."

Miller said she is currently looking into opening facilities in Camp Springs near Joint Base Andrews, urging the panelists at the discussion that any transitional housing facility in the county needs a family support and counseling center as well as emergency shelter. Most panelists agreed that local, state and federal governments need to combine resources to address the program.

"We have been told that female veterans are sleeping in their cars with their children," she said. "What do we do from here? We need to put this plan into action."

Ross said most people do not know the severity of issues facing veterans who are homeless. After touring shelters and transitional housing facilities for veterans in the region, he said there needs to be more awareness to address the problem.

"We've been to the VA. We've been to shelters for veterans. I was truly amazed about how big the problem is," said Ross. "We have the resources to eradicate homelessness among veterans in Prince George's County — it does not have to be a reality."

During the discussion, veteran advocates argued that veterans face a tough road after leaving military careers, often facing stress disorders, substance abuse and homelessness. They urged state and local politicians to do more to understand the needs of at-risk veterans, adding that Prince George's County and Southern Maryland were the most underserved communities in the state because there are so few housing and health facilities for veterans.

"Some [politicians] don't understand what a homeless veteran truly is," said Regina Powell, a commissioner on the Prince George's County Commission for Veterans. "Nobody understands because they don't want to get out from behind a desk and see what it's like."

County Councilman Tony Knotts (D-Dist. 8) of Temple Hills said there needs to be more awareness in identifying homeless veterans.

"Do we truly understand what a homeless veteran looks like?" Knotts said. "We need to understand how to identify homeless veterans so we can engage them in dialogue."

Wilbert Forbes, deputy secretary for the Maryland Department of Veteran Affairs, said that veterans don't usually stand out as homeless and aren't always willing to share that they are homeless.

"Veterans are very proud people — they don't walk with plaques on their backs saying they're homeless," he said.

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